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FOR NEA/FO - GRAY; NEA/MAG - HOPKINS AND HARRIS
NSC FOR ABRAMS

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TAGS: PREL PTER TS
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR SAYS SALAFIST THREAT IN
TUNISIA HAS BEEN NEUTRALIZED

REF: A. TUNIS 44
 1B. TUNIS 31
 1C. TUNIS 30
 1D. TUNIS 16
 1E. 05 TUNIS 2980
 1F. 05 TUNIS 2973

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: Minister of State and Special Presidential Advisor Ben Dchia today told the Ambassador with "quasi certitude" that the Tunisian security services had finished their operations against the armed Salafist group (reflets), which had been planning to target the US and British embassies. He said that GOT security services had found detailed plans of the embassies, as well as the names of "some" US and UK embassy officials, in the houses used by the armed men. Security services also found between 50-60 kg of locally produced explosives. Twelve of the suspects had been killed and 15 arrested; among the Tunisian security services, two had died and three were injured. End Summary.

Threat Neutralized;
US, UK Embassies Were Targets

12. (S) In a 50-minute courtesy call on January 8, Tunisian Minister of State, Special Advisor to the President, and Official Spokesperson of the Presidency Abdelaziz Ben Dchia told the Ambassador with "quasi certitude" that the GOT had wrapped up its security operations against the Salafist group with its December 23 and January 3 operations (reflets). The group had intended to target the US and British Embassies, according to the GOT's investigation of the matter and interrogation of the suspects. In the several houses used by the group, Tunisian security services found highly detailed maps of the US and British Embassies, including some that had been downloaded from googleearth.com, as well as lists with the names of "some officials" of those Embassies. Asked if the GOT security services had also found indications that the group had been planning to target some of the residences of employees of the US, UK, or French Embassies (as had been indicated by Foreign Minister Abdallah, ref A), Ben Dchia responded negatively. He also said that the group had not intended to target Tunisian interests.

13. (S) GOT security services found between 50-60 kilograms of explosives in the group's residences. Ben Dchia described the explosives as locally produced, "artisanal" in nature. Ben Dchia explained that the Tunisian security services had been monitoring the group since an initial group of six armed men had crossed the Algerian border. The security services kept these six suspects under surveillance as they were gradually joined by 21 others in the Grombalia area. On December 23, concluding that the group was beginning preparations for attacks planned to coincide with the end of the year, the GOT decided to act proactively to take the group down. Noting that local newspapers had published photographs of one of the residences used by the group, Ben Dchia explained that some of the suspects in the house during the December 23 shoot-out had managed to flee via an open window.

Casualties

14. (S) In the aftermath of the GOT security operations, 12 of the suspects had been killed and 15 arrested, accounting for all 27 suspects, according to Ben Dchia. As for GOT casualties, Ben Dchia said there had been two killed and three wounded. Asked whether the GOT had been able to account for the support network that would have been required to sustain the group, Ben Dchia responded that the security services had investigated this matter, and that they consider the operation "terminated for the instant."

Information-Sharing

15. (S) Ben Dchia credited the GOT's intelligence liaison relationships with friendly countries, notably Algeria and Libya, with producing the actionable intelligence to neutralize this threat. Thanking Ben Dchia for sharing this information, the Ambassador also reiterated that the USG

stands ready to help the GOT in the fight against terrorism, emphasizing that "We are all in this fight together." Ambassador also encouraged Ben Dchia to share his information directly with the British and French ambassadors, and other key members of the diplomatic corps, a suggestion Ben Dchia took onboard.

Comment

16. (C) In addition to immediately sharing the above information with his British counterpart, Ambassador will follow up on this information in a January 9 meeting with Minister of Interior and Local Development Raïk Belhaj Kacem.

17. (S) While we welcome the apparent effectiveness of the Tunisian security services, and the willingness of two senior officials to share some information with us, we are troubled by several issues. First and foremost is the allure of the GOT to share information sooner, and in more detail. Second, we are struck by the contradictions in some of the information we are receiving. Tuesday's meeting with the Minister of the Interior may (and we underscore may) produce more concrete and detailed information. Until we get better information, we have only bits and pieces of what increasingly appears to be a complex and dangerous puzzle.

Bio Notes

18. (C) Ben Dchia was confident, friendly, and gracious during the meeting, and he appeared to be in good health. Twice invoking President Ben Ali's name, Ben Dchia underscored that he well understands Ben Ali's intentions, specifically noting that Ben Ali wants to solidify relations with the United States. Ben Dchia also indicated that he comes from a family of imams; as such, he said, he takes particular umbrage at the "deviation" of Islam represented by Islamic extremists. Repeatedly bemoaning how easy it is for Islamic extremists to manipulate the ignorant, he ventured that were Mohammed to return to earth today, he would not recognize the Islam that many practice. Ben Dchia remembered fondly his first official trip to the United States, which he undertook as Minister of Higher Education at a time when the USG and Tunisia were launching an educational exchange program. He also noted that his son travels to the United States "almost monthly."

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